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ABSTRACT

The use of ratings of children by judges is pervasive in the area of father absence research. The interpretatic of such ratings, though, is not always straightforward. The possibility that teacher ratings of children may indicate a stereotype on the part of teachers was investigated by showing 30 teachers a videotape that focused on the social interaction of an eight-year-old boy. Half of the teachers were given a background informatior sheet that indicated he was from a divorced home, while the other half were informed that he was from an intact home. The teachers were asked to view the videotape and then to rate the boy on a wide range of 11 personality traits (e.g., anxiety, social deviance, and happiness) and to predict what his behavior would be like in five different school situations (e.g., copes with stress, popularity). The Bonferroni multiple comparisons procedure indicated that the teachers rated the "divorced" child more negatively on three variables reflecting affective state or relations: Happiness, Emotional Adjustment, and Copes with Stress. (Author)

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The Effects of Children's Family Structure Status on the Development of Stereotypes by Teachers

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Running Head: Family Structure Status...

The Effects of Children's Family Structure Status on the Development of Stereotypes by Teachers

Adverse effects of father absence on social and cognitive development have been reported in several reviews (e.g., Biller, 1970; Lynn, 1974; Lamb, 1976). Nonetheless, a number of methodological problems has clouded the interpretation of many of these studies (Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Pederson, 1976). Information about children in studies of father absence has been obtained using a variety of sources and methods of data collection. Mothers have been interviewed, teachers have been asked to provide trait ratings of children, a host of structured and non-structured personality tests have been given, clinicians have been asked to rate children on personality characteristics, and sometimes behavioral observations are made.

The use of ratings of children by judges who have a varying degree of knowledge about the children is pervasive in the area of father absence research (and in the entire field of parent-child relations as well). And, unfortunately, many researchers also still choose to use a single measure to evaluate the child's personality or intelligence. The interpretation of such ratings, though, is not always straightforward. This is because rating scale assessments usually agree only moderately with more behavioral assessments, and occasionally, the two methods yield incompatible results.

The validity of rating scale assessment techniques has been seriously challenged on the grounds that ratings may largely reflect the "implicit" personality theory" of the individual rater, rather than characteristics of the individual being rated (Mischel, 1968, 1973).

A study by Santrock (1975) illustrates the discrepancy in results often found between trait ratings and more behaviorally-based measures. He examined

the effects of father absence on moral development. Moral behavior was assessed with resistance-to-temptation, self-criticism, altruism, reparation, and teacher-rating measures, while moral judgment was evaluated with three Kohlberg items and moral affect was investigated with two story completion items maximizing guilt. When relevant variables (IQ, SES, age, sibling status) were controlled, few differences were found between father absent and father present boys. However, father absent boys were reported by their teachers as less advanced in moral development than father present boys. Further, the sons of the divorced women showed more "social deviation," according to their teachers.

The interpretation of the discrepancy between Santrock's findings based on ratings vs. those obtained from direct observation is not clear. On the one hand, the teacher ratings may accurately reflect the child's behavior over long periods of time and as such be less influenced by situational variability than on-the-spot behavioral observations of the child. On the other hand, teacher ratings may reflect the implicit theory of the rater and his/her misperception of the child's behavior.

The intent of the present investigation was to explore the possibility that teacher ratings of children may indicate a stereotype on the part of the teacher that entails negative expectations for children from divorced families and positive expectations for children from father present families.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimenters

The subjects were 30 undergraduate and graduate students attending the University of . All were either graduate students who

were teachers or undergraduate students who were completing or had completed their student teaching requirements. The mean age of the subjects was 33.8 years. The experimenters were two graduate student males.

Materials and Procedure

The subjects were randomly assigned to one of two conditions -- an intact family condition (mean age of subjects = 32.0 years) or a divorced family condition (mean age of subjects = 35.6 years). Subjects in each group were shown, individually, the same 20 minute videotape of an eight-year-old boy named David. The videotape depicted David at home and on the playground during peer interaction. Considerable time was spent with David and his friends, talking with them and allowing them to get used to the videotape camera before the actual taping.

The following written information was given to the teachers in both conditions:

"This study deals with the effects of divorce on the social and emotional development of children. Despite the fact that divorce is by now commonplace in our society, very little is known about its actual impact on the child. And, the previous work in this area has examined this issue using highly artificial, laboratory-type assessments. It is an open question as to whether such assessments accurately reflect features of the child's normal, everyday behavior in his natural environment.

The present study is designed to examine the effects of divorce by looking at the normal, everyday behavior of children under naturalistic conditions. We think that this method has considerable

promise of resolving much of the present controversy in the literature. At this point in our research program, we want to see whether raters, working independently of each other, can agree reasonably well on the ratings of a child's personality based on seeing a short videotape of the child's behavior. We have obtained videotapes of children interacting with other children in a playgroup situation. Half our tapes focus on children from divorced homes; the other half picture children from intact (non-divorced) homes. What we want you to do today is to view a tape of one child and rate this child on several personality traits."

Subjects in the Intact Home Condition then read:

"The child you are about to see is from an intact home and is named David. He is eight years old and is in the third grade. He is living with his mother, father, and brother in ."

Subjects in the Divorced Group Condition then read:

"The child you are about to see is from a divorced home and is named David. He is eight years old and in the third grade. His father and mother were divorced about four years ago and he now lives with his mother and brother in . The extent of David's contact with his father is not known to us."

Having read the instructions, the subjects were asked if they had any questions. If not, the experimenter started the tape and pointed out who David was. The subjects were told to attend carefully to him so that they could subsequently rate his personality.

After the subjects had viewed the tape, the experimenter handed the subject two sheets of paper -- one called the "Personality Trait Rating

Scale," the other labeled "Predicted Behavior in School." The Personality Trait Rating Scale was completed first. The subject was asked to rate David on a 1-9 scale (1 being very low, 9 being very high) for the following personality traits: Happiness, Gets Along with Others, Need for Achievement, Introversion, Emotional Adjustment, Morality, Anxiety, Aggression, Deviance, and Sex Role Adjustment. On the "Predicted Behavior in School" sheet, the subject was asked to now think about how David might be expected to act in school. David was rated on a 1-9 scale for the following items: "How much is he likely to break school rules and regulations?" (very unlikely to very likely); "How well do you think he would cope with stressful situations at school?" (cope very poorly to cope very well); "To what extent do you feel he would be cooperative with teachers at school?" (very cooperative to very uncooperative); "How popular do you think he would be with his classmates at school?" (very unpopular to very popular); "Is he likely to assume leadership positions at school?" (very unlikely to very likely); and, "To what extent is he the type of child you could leave the classroom and know that he still would do his work and follow your directions of what the class should do while you are gone?" (very unlikely to very likely).

Careful attention was given to scheduling videotape viewing times in order to minimize the opportunity for the subjects to discuss the experiment with each other. At the end of the session, the subjects were asked not to discuss the experiment with their classmates. They were then debriefed and informed about the actual format of the experiment; namely, all subjects viewed and assessed the same child. As part of the debriefing, the subject was asked if s/he knew about or could guess what we were trying to find out in the present study. None of the subjects detected that all were seeing the same videotape and that the experiment actually concerned stereotypes.

Results and Discussion

The means and standard deviations for each of the 16 items the teachers were asked to rate are shown in Table 1. The teacher ratings were

Insert Table 1 about here

subjected to two different analyses. First, the liberal strategy of applying a t test separately to each of the 16 scales was followed. Nine of the 16 tests were significant at $p \leq .05$, and 5 of those were significant at $p \leq .01$. Each statistically significant comparison involved ratings that were less favorable in the divorced home condition as compared with the intact home condition. The second data analysis strategy involved a more conservative approach to evaluating group differences on the 16 personality trait items, namely the Bonferroni multiple comparisons procedure (Morrison, 1976). This approach provides an overall (or experiment-wide) alpha level. When the Bonferroni procedure was applied to the 16 comparisons in the present study, three were significant at $p \leq .05$: Happiness, Emotional Adjustment, and Copes with Stress. Each of these three significant comparisons yielded less favorable ratings of the "divorced" child. Interestingly, and serendipitously, these three variables logically form a cluster that reflect the affective state or relations of the child.

Before going further, it is important to recognize that in the present study the teachers were given a specific set about the nature of the study -- that it dealt with the effects of divorce. This strategy was deliberate -- that is, in this initial exploratory investigation of

divorce stereotypy effort was expended to make the teachers conscious of the fact that the study involved children from divorced homes, as well as children from intact homes. In future studies focused on divorce stereotypy, it may be wise to include a control group in which teachers or other social agents simply are asked to rate the child(ren) on a set of personality traits with no family background information available to the rater. If, however, a powerful "divorce" set were operating in the present study, the significant differences would have been more numerous and not fallen into a psychologically meaningful cluster.

There does seem to be stress, conflict, and problems involved in family dynamics that predispose children from father absent homes to be less competent in social and cognitive development than children from father present homes (e.g., Lynn, 1974). Not all of the burden, however, stems from the family per se. The present results suggest that the child from a father absent home is likely to be perceived more negatively by his teachers than a similar child from an intact family.

There was no attempt to evaluate any particular type of teacher in the present study. Undoubtedly, some teachers are very careful to avoid negative evaluations of children from so-called "bad" families. Indeed, teachers occasionally go in the opposite direction and bend over backwards to evaluate children from such families as fairly as possible and assist them in whatever way they can. Future investigations should attempt to identify those characteristics of teachers that render them more or less susceptible to stereotypes about children from divorced homes. Such research should also include boys and girls and male and female teachers. For example, would the stereotype operate as strongly with male teachers and male children?

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Level of Significance of Teacher Ratings
of a Child from a "Divorced" and an "Intact" Home

Scale	Intact Home Group		Divorced Home Group		Level of Significance	
	$\bar{X}$	σ	$\bar{X}$	σ	Ind.* Compar.	Exp't** Wide Compar.
Personality Trait Ratings						
Happiness	7.47	1.19	5.20	1.26	.0001	.01
Gets Along with Others	6.47	1.55	4.60	1.68	.004	.13
n-Achievement	6.80	1.57	6.73	2.02	ns	ns
Introversion	2.47	1.41	4.00	2.24	.04	ns
Emotional Adjustment	6.47	1.30	4.33	1.45	.0002	.01
Morality	5.73	1.22	4.73	1.49	ns(.055)	ns
Anxiety	4.40	1.96	6.13	2.00	.02	ns
Aggression	6.93	1.22	7.27	1.28	ns	ns
Deviance	3.93	2.43	5.87	1.19	.02	ns
Sex Role Adjustment	6.33	1.59	6.00	1.13	ns	ns
Predicted Behavior in School						
Breaks Rules	5.87	1.85	6.47	1.92	ns	ns
Copes with Stress	5.67	1.80	3.53	1.51	.002	.05
Cooperative	5.27	1.75	5.67	1.29	ns	ns
Popularity	5.73	1.67	4.33	1.29	.02	ns
Leadership	6.20	1.97	4.00	1.93	.005	ns(.15)
Works without direction	3.67	2.16	2.53	.99	ns(.08)	ns

N=30, 15 per group

* t test

** Bonferroni Multiple Comparisons Test

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Footnotes

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